Building School-Community Partnerships to Improve Student Mental Health in Rural Communities

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Noah is a thirteen-year-old living in rural upstate New York. He lives with two siblings and his mother, who works part-time at three jobs including one that requires a 45-minute commute. Noah has been struggling with feelings of worthlessness, and it is getting harder for him to focus, even on favorite activities like playing soccer. Noah is not sure when this set of feelings started, but it all became worse after losing his grandfather. The school social worker has met Noah and suspects depression. Unfortunately, this is the only social worker in both the middle and high school in this community, and he is unable to provide Noah with the services he needs. This professional also believes Noah should be assessed for medication treatment, but transporting Noah to the county mental health clinic, which is 50 miles away, presents another set of challenges.

How can school-community partnerships address the challenges faced by students in rural communities?

1. Leverage Community Partners to Increase Support to Students

School-Community Partnerships (SCPs) are important tools for any school – especially those that are under-resourced – because they expand the range of services and resources available to students. The best partnerships leverage both school-based and community-based services and mobilize diverse stakeholders to meet a variety of student needs, including physical and mental health, educational attainment and preparation for college and career.

SCPs bring together existing resources and organizations within a community to solve large and complex shared problems for children such as family homelessness, truancy, and youth mental health issues. SCPs require intensive collaborative work that involves:

1. Formal agreements between organizations;
2. Shared understanding of the problem and vision for addressing the problem; and
3. Coordination of the work of individual organizations – through the help of an intermediary – as part of a shared approach to achieve common purposes.

2. SCPs Bridge the Gap Between Schools and Community-Based Mental Health Services

One in every five youth in the United States meets the criteria for a mental health disorder, and youth who live in poverty are especially vulnerable. In rural communities, young people are 20% less likely to visit a mental health provider compared to children living in urban communities.1 Like Noah, key barriers prevent youth in rural communities from accessing mental health treatment, which include:

1. inadequate health insurance;
2. distance from mental health services; and
3. unreliable and expensive transportation that exacerbates distance issues.

Children in rural communities are also more likely than their urban peers to rely on mental health services offered through school. However, like Noah’s school, rural schools also tend to have fewer resources to address student mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and trauma. Additionally, rural communities across the country have been hit particularly hard by the opioid and heroin crisis, which exacerbate mental health issues.

When young people do not receive the necessary assistance to address their mental health issues, the consequences are significant. Untreated mental health issues can result in more absences from school and the inability to focus on academics as young people attempt to manage the effects of mental health disorders. Without adequate intervention, untreated

mental health issues undermine the ability of schools to carry out their mission to educate and prepare young people to thrive in adult life.

**How do you build SCPs in your community?**

Lessons from Rural Communities Illustrate Best Practices

1. **Facilitate Dialogue Between Stakeholders.**

The building blocks of any formal partnership are relationships between stakeholders. The first step toward relationship-building is to identify and engage stakeholders in dialogue to discuss issues and opportunities, and to decide what other stakeholders should be invited to the conversation. This will involve meeting regularly. Bringing assessment or evaluative data to these meetings can help spark conversations that mobilize around shared issues.

Start with established relationships with trustworthy stakeholders. Informal leaders might be among the most trusted, knowledgeable and influential. This may be particularly true in rural communities where there are fewer formal supports and a greater desire for independence.

Engaging stakeholders who have important social connections can facilitate network development. Be mindful of stakeholders who may resist change efforts. However, it will be necessary to engage those with entrenched viewpoints, especially if their cooperation is needed to move forward.

What stakeholders should be engaged?

- school administrators, educators, and student support professionals (e.g., school nurse, school psychologist, school social workers, guidance counselors);
- students and families (who can inform conversations with unique insight into challenges);
- community/neighborhood leaders (formal and informal);
- physical and mental health service providers;
- organizations representing families or informal parent/family leaders; and
- county governments or other regional governmental entities.

2. **Identify Your Backbone.**

At this stage, identify an organization that will be able to serve as the “backbone” for the partnership. The backbone is a separate organization with staff skilled in how to organize and orchestrate the various activities, while not directing or overshadowing stakeholder work. Backbones coordinate between partners, facilitate meetings, and provide structure and accountability. Organizations like the United Way often make good candidates to serve as this support. For communities lacking such an organization, it might be necessary to create a new entity or intermediary that is initially a coalition of existing individuals/organizations to serve this purpose.

3. **Develop Your Shared Vision.**

A shared vision is a joint understanding of the problem and its solution. It is helpful to keep a narrow focus, at least initially. It can be easy to build a vision that ultimately overwhelms the time and abilities of the group. Understanding the key drivers of the problem first is essential because acting without it can result in inappropriate solutions.

In Noah’s community, a shared vision can be as simple as “all children in the community deserve access to high-quality mental health care.” Through discussion with stakeholders, the team might determine key factors are the lack of insurance coverage for mental health services and transportation to access those services.

4. **Construct Mutually Reinforcing Activities.**

To sustain the partnership, organizations must be interdependent. This is fostered by constructing mutually reinforcing activities meaning that, while not all partners are doing the same thing, each partner is reliant on the work of the others to successfully complete their own work. These activities should be explicit and tied to the greater vision for the partnership. Also, invite partners and stakeholders to engage in knowledge building that will help achieve their activities, while also reinforcing their interdependence.

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Establishing a set of shared measurements for evaluating success across all participating organizations also facilitates interdependence and accountability. Continuous evaluation offers an opportunity for the partners to evaluate whether their approach is producing the sort of outcomes they envision and whether adjustments need to be made. Most partnerships do not get it right the first time. After all, this sort of intensive and coordinated work between and across schools and organizations is complex.


Partnerships function best when they are responsive to the unique needs and contexts of each community. These practices offer guidance, but they do not replace the knowledge you have about your community. Embrace these approaches when they help you make progress and adapt them when they limit your success. Identify the inherent strengths in your community and draw on them. For many rural communities it could be the sense of trust and familiarity that often exists between community members, the creative and flexible orientation that comes when resources are limited, or a desire to solve problems within the community.

Community-School Partnerships can leverage existing resources in innovative ways to address unmet mental health issues faced by students and schools in rural communities where resources can be limited and geographically dispersed.

References


